

“First Joust” and The Strike on Syria

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Global Research, April 20, 2018

Region: [Middle East & North Africa, Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD, US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

With slight disappointment the public regarded the field. Just a minute ago, two knights were converging in fearsome joust, their spears pointing forth, plumage blowing, horses galloping, ladies out waving their handkerchiefs to their champions, – and now we see they have passed each other, both firmly in the saddle, plumage unruffled, spears unbloodied, horses trotting away joyfully.

“Cowards!” – the boys shouted, while the ladies are happy to see their knights riding off the field unharmed. We all know this was just the first joust, where prudence often inhibits the testosterone flush. Soon, the knights will ride again.



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This is a brief summary of the Syrian strike. An external force had pushed the leaders of Russia and the US into confrontation; Putin and Trump were equally unwilling to fight, but they couldn't avoid the charge. The best they could do, they did: they avoided each other.

This was the somewhat unexpected conclusion of the carefully planned encounter. It plainly did not make sense to fire up fear and loathing of Russians to its unprecedented heights for such a finale. A mountain gave birth to a mouse, as Horace said. Presumably, the mountain will make another effort.

The last thing I want is to cheer and encourage the next encounter. The two presidents already have displayed vigour and courage by limiting the damage to a minimum. It is unwise to troll them for failing to defeat their opponent, though this is now being done by hundreds of pundits and by millions of private persons.

On the US side, Trump has been castigated by such brilliant humanitarians as Mr Mohammed (brother to late unlamented Zahran) Alloush, the leader of *Jaysh al-Islam*, a moderate Jihadi fighter group supported and paid for by that most progressive prince and lady drivers' best friend, Mohammed bin Salman. The airstrikes were "a farce", he [said](#). Israel is also [upset](#) that President Trump "did the minimum he could".

If Trump hasn't been skinned yet by the neocons in Washington, it's because he judiciously brought into his camp the worst warmongers, John Bolton and Nikki Haley as human shields in the case of a neocon attack: nobody can accuse a man whose security adviser is Bolton and the UN ambassador is Haley of being soft on Putin. Now they can't voice their indignation. As they say in the army, it's better to have them inside the tent pissing out than outside the tent pissing in.

Well, some guys are anyway unhappy. Vil Mirzayanov, the Russian expert, who had spied over the development of the Novichok chemical weapon and immigrated to the US, wrote in his blog to his erstwhile CIA masters:

"[by this strike], Trump confirmed that he is a Putin's agent! Poor Nikki [Haley] should slam the door and leave, as an honest person can't serve under Kremlin's agent".

Real Kremlin's agents, trolls and scribes, or alternatively, Western dissidents presented the strike as a "huge victory for Putin". This is the common ground of Putin and anti-Putin trolls: whatever the Kremlin ruler does, has to be presented as his great victory. Afterwards, they part their ways, and Putin's agents bless the Lord for Putin, while anti-Putin trolls call to fight him harder and accuse everybody softer than Genghis Khan of collaboration with the tyrant.

It is silly to present the strike as Putin's achievement. Kremlin tried to avoid the strike altogether, spoke darkly of a harsh response, of "carriers" being shot at, of Satan 2.0 and nuclear winter, but the talk failed to stop the strike. No British or American planes were downed, or even shot at. The Russians didn't use their S-300 or S-400 SAM systems, claiming the US missiles didn't approach Russian bases. This is a dubious argument: Putin tried to stop at attack on Damascus; and Damascus is not a Russian base. Let us face it: Putin did not stop the strike and he didn't make the offender pay a price for this breach of the Law of Nations.

General (Ret) Leonid Ivashov, an important Russian military observer, [said](#) the strike had annihilated Russian deterrence, exposed Putin's bluff of his powerful new weapons and, worst of all, proved him indecisive and unable to respond to an attack. We walked away with our tail between our hind legs, as punished dogs, he continued. Russia's achievements in Syria have been erased by this shameful inaction.

What is worse, Trump's strike destroyed what was left of the international law structure established by Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin. These three giants created the UN and its Security Council in order to avoid such eventualities by forbidding aggression, and the strike has been definitely an act of aggression against a sovereign state despite an objection of a permanent SC member, namely Russia. Now the gates of hell are open, international law has been demolished, and this happened because Putin agreed to accommodate Trump's strike, said Ivashov.

Though official Russian media speaks of a great Russian victory, as no Russian or Syrian soldiers were killed, many Russians subscribe to the bleak view of Ivashov. The main question is whether this Russian fight aversion will encourage the Americans to carry out a future strike, or whether Trump will rein in his adversaries.

It is hard to accept the official Russian version saying the Syrian SAM systems intercepted 70% of the incoming missiles, as the excellent journalist Pepe Escobar did. This would be too good a result even for the best, latest, and most update systems. The unimpressive outcome of the attack can be explained easier by Trump's decision to minimise the damage, as indeed the Israeli military says.

The Russian military experts here in Moscow told me that out of a hundred missiles fired by the US and their allies, only one or two were modern cruise missiles ("nice and smart") and they destroyed the research institute in Barzeh. (It was not a "chemical weapons centre", just a chemical research institute; it's destruction was a copy-paste of Bill Clinton's bombing of the pharmaceutical factory in Sudan over a similar pretext.)

All other missiles were old and at the end of their service; they had to be utilised somehow, and so they were. A few of them might have been downed by Syrian anti-aircraft fire, others fell without inflicting much damage. Syrian air defence is not able to blow modern cruise missiles out of sky; Syrian appeals to supply them with modern SAM systems have been refused at the request of Israel. (Netanyahu came to Moscow saying that S-300 in Syrian hands will turn all Israel into a no-fly zone; Putin agreed with him, and the Syrians were denied modern SAMs.) Now, hopefully these modern systems will find its way to Syrian army.

The Russian experts who were in contact with the US military told me that the US military used this occasion for retraining and refreshing reserve pilots; what they call "a milk run". This combination of old missiles and less experienced pilots helped to lower the efficiency of the strike. And both sides, the Russians and the Americans, admitted that the deconfliction line was operative all the time, to avoid eventualities.

I'd consider that a good conclusion of the fictional chemical weapons story. The story has fallen to pieces altogether, anyway. The poisoning of Skripal ended with the old spy in good health; with Boris Johnson being caught lying; with [the chemical weapons control body] OPCW refusing to connect Skripal's poison to Moscow; and with Brits keeping Miss Skripal incommunicado under duress, away from her fiancé and the rest of her family, a clear sign of a collapsing story. Hopefully, Jeremy Corbyn will be able to use May's debacle for his political advantage.

The Syrian part of this story collapsed as well, after [Robert Fisk](#), one of the very best British Middle East observers (next to David Hirst) visited Douma and delivered a report straight from the donkey's mouth, i.e. as told by a doctor of the clinic videoed by the White Helmets. He said:

"There was a lot of shelling [by government forces] and aircraft were always over Douma at night - but on this night, there was wind and huge dust clouds began to come into the basements and cellars where people lived. People began to arrive here [to the clinic] suffering from hypoxia, oxygen loss. Then someone at the door, a "White Helmet", shouted "Gas!", and a panic began. People started throwing water over each other. Yes, the video was filmed here, it is genuine, but what you see are people suffering from hypoxia - not gas

poisoning.”

The Russians actually located some people who are seen in the video, and they say it was staged. (Western media says they were threatened into saying what they said). I have more trust in Fisk’s report, than in the Russian one, but that may be my own prejudice. Anyway, both versions are not mutually exclusive, they do not contradict each other, but they undermine the fake story that provided the cue for the strike.

An interesting bit of data, proving that preparations for the strike were carried out before the alleged attack, has been published by the Cyprus banking community blog. They say the British air base of Akrotiri on Cyprus had its perimeter urgently strengthened (by the British company Agility) on April 5, that is before the alleged Douma gas attack. The second British air base, Dhekelia, carried out similar works on April 12, a week later, before the decision to strike had been adopted by the British government. The Dhekelia works were done with great speed and urgency, and road-constructing equipment had to be taken from the nearby villages of Xylotympou and Ormideia. The payment to the local workers had been routed via HSBC bank in Hong Kong, they say. And indeed these bases (forcibly retained by Britain) were used for the strike on Syria.

The OPCW could dispel the mist around both cases, that of Skripal and that of Douma, but do not hold your breath. It appears that OPCW is as integrated into the machinery of the Masters of Discourse as any other international body. Refusal of OPCW to allow Russia to take part in Skripal investigation, despite the clear requirement of its own charter, makes its conclusion doubtful, at best. While inability of OPCW inspectors to enter Douma despite all efforts of Damascus and Russians to facilitate their entry tells us they are not eager to investigate; like they weren’t eager to enter Khan Sheykhun last year.

Meanwhile, the Western media and the Jihadi groups on the ground are busy to create a new web of lies instead of the old one. Now they say the Fisk report is suspicious because he was allowed in by the Russians. We can learn of their attitudes from the following tweet

“Salih @Salih90119797 Apr 17 More

Replying to @Elizrael

We salute Israel in spite their crimes in Palestine we hope they’ll continue their strikes every part of Syria; Iran regime should comedown”

These “Islamic rebels” are actually Israel’s stooges rather than warriors of the Prophet.

Anyway, people who manufactured these beautiful and complicated simulacra, are still around, and doubtless they will prepare a new one, if it will be necessary.

In my view, the two presidents have made heroic efforts at saving their countries and mankind from destruction; both risked their good names, their positions, their reputations to go that far. Trump minimized the bombing, Putin minimized the response.

Both have made some mistakes. Mr Putin made his big mistake when he gave Israel carte blanche to bomb Syria whenever she feels like it. Israeli strikes (and there were more than a hundred of them last year) created the air of permissiveness and that allowed Trump to

follow in Israel's footsteps. If Israel bombs Syria, and Russians do not react, why can't Trump? It appears unfair for the US to be bested by its satellite. If you permit Tom to grab your girlfriend's pussy without a single objection, you must expect that Dick and Harry will try to repeat this feat. Israel created the precedent, the US used it.

I asked Senator Alexey Pushkov, the head of the foreign relations committee, whether he doesn't think it was a mistake, in hindsight. He justified the policy saying that Russia came to Syria in order to fight jihadi groups, ISIS, Al Qaeda et al, not Israel. Russia is friendly to Israel, Iran and Turkey, and it does not want to sort out local disagreements. Pushkov stressed that Russia always censured Israeli raids on Syria, though it didn't act against them. As a matter of fact, if Russia criticized Israel, it was done very, very quietly. The only time this condemnation was made public, happened just now, when the Israeli strike occurred in a very tense moment.

Mr Trump made a mistake when he fired the missiles instead of firing Mueller. But anyway, thank you, Mr Trump, for limiting the damage. Try to complete the withdrawal from Syria, while at it.

However, the big problem is that the forces promoting war are still active. It feels that there is a big wave carrying the Russian and American boats into a collision and the rocks. This time, the leaders succeeded managed to avoid the confrontation. But the wave is still there, and the next time we may be less lucky.

We have entered a new phase of human conscience, when millions of social network users express their opinion. These opinions are often dangerous and our enemies know how to manipulate. Unless there is a serious effort to lower destructive feelings, mankind will perish, and we would have nobody to blame but ourselves.

It is necessary to counteract the US-Russian confrontation with a positive action. The bloodshed in Gaza provides a good cause for such action. A joint effort by Russia and the US to relieve the Gaza siege may change the agenda of the world. It will also take the mind of the warmongers off Syria and off Moscow.

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This article was first published on [The Unz Review](#).

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